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GOING DOWN

?

He was an unusual cop. His power of persuasion was enormous.

BY
JACK RITCHIE

SEVERAL floors below me, firemen were stringing up a safety net.

Sergeant Morgan had eased himself out on the ledge too and now he stood up. "It's a long way down, mister. When you land you'll be nothing but a wide mess."

"The configuration of my remains does not concern me at the moment," I said coldly.

It was evidently part of the sergeant's job to keep me talking. "What's so bad that you think you can solve it by jumping?"

"Nothing specific," I said. "It is simply that the sum total of existence is impossible to bear. I am Everyman and Everyman is a failure."

He took a well-worn cigar stub out of his mouth. "Look, I don't go for this Everyman jazz. You got trouble with your wife? What would she think about you doing this?"

"I rather suspect that she would encourage me to take one or two steps forward."

Morgan listened for a few seconds to someone leaning out of the window behind him and then spoke to me again. "You're registered as Amos Dawson?"

"Yes. However don't bother asking me for my actual name."

He worried the cigar. "You got children, ain't you? What would they think if they seen you up here?"

"I have one son and he is a disappointment. He became a pharmacist."

"You got to learn to take the good with the bad," Morgan said. "Like I wanted my boy to be on the force, but it didn't work out."

"I suppose your father was a policeman?" I asked acidly. "And his father before him?"

"Well, no," Sergeant Morgan said. "But you got to start a tradition somewhere. Lance is a carburetor man at Len's Auto Service."

"Lance?"

Morgan shrugged. "I didn't have nothing to do with that. The name

was my wife's idea." He began searching through his pockets. "You don't happen to have any Tums on you?"

"No."

He sighed. "I'll bet it's mostly wife troubles bothering you? That right? You don't get along now? But remember, she was the girl that you was in love with when you got married."

"She was?"

"Sure," Morgan said. "Why else did you marry her?"

"Fatal propinquity."

"Now take my case," Morgan said. "She was the girl next door. Weighed in at one-twenty." He thought about that. "You could double that now easy."

I had chosen the side of the building sheltered from the wind and normal conversation was possible. "Everyman is born and doomed to failure," I said. "The sooner he realizes that and defies fate and the universe by a positive-negative action, the better. . . ."

"So things didn't work out," Morgan said. "But life's still worth living."

"Why?"

"Well. . . ." He rubbed his jaw. "If it weren't, then why do people keep on living?"

"Because they are either idiots or cowards afraid of death."

He looked me over. "You wouldn't put yourself in the idiot class, would you?"

"Of course not," I said coolly.

He nodded. "All these years you're a coward, you'd be useful."

I thought. "I thought you seemed rather clever. You bother you seriously."

He shook his head. "It's a shame. It's a shame. It's a shame."

"What for?"

"Auto failure. Third and Fourth years and then I decided now I'm in."

"Really? Up here to the top?"

"Nobody. I just happen to be in the subway."

"When you're talking. A man wants to be in the middle stream."

"They're just in their time. The newspaper."

He glanced at the traffic. "See there? Look at the newspaper."

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He nodded. "So then if you lived all these years only because you're a coward, I'd think that by now you'd be used to it?"

I thought the sergeant's face seemed rather gray. "Do heights bother you?" I asked a trifle maliciously.

He shook his head. "Not especially. It's my insides. What the fumes done."

"What fumes?"

"Auto fumes. I directed traffic on Third and Wisconsin for seventeen years and then the department medics decided I ought to transfer. So now I'm in bunco."

"Really? And the police sent *you* up here to talk to me?"

"Nobody sent me," Morgan said. "I just happened to be walking to the subway minding my own business when I looked up and seen you. So I rushed up here and started talking. And now nobody inside wants to relieve me. They say they don't want to change horses in mid-stream. But personally I think they're just afraid you'll jump on their time and it might look bad in the newspapers."

He glanced down at the stalled traffic. "See that big truck over there? Looks like you're on television." He exhaled wearily. "That's where I should be now. At home watching this on TV." His face became pensive. "In the old days I could sit in front of TV with a case of beer and watch the ball games all afternoon. But now one bottle

makes me sick as a dog. The fumes, you know."

I sincerely wished someone else had arrived here first. "Very well, so you can't drink beer. I'm sure you've managed to fill in your time with something else."

Morgan shook his head. "It was the only hobby I had. Television just ain't the same."

I gazed out into space. "If Everyman is to be more than simply a compliant mote in this universe, then he must. . . ."

"There's one thing I got no trouble with, though," Morgan said. "My ears."

"I wasn't aware that *I* was shouting."

"Not you. My wife. I could use a little deafness around the house, but in the ears I got twenty-twenty."

"Women feel unfulfilled unless they are making noise," I said. "Basically it is their desire to be noticed, to be want . . ."

A suspicion descended upon me. Was Morgan engaged in the stratagem of pretending that his miserable cares were important in order to belittle my own? I smiled firmly. "Now concerning my son. My family has been Liberal Arts for generations. We did not even *speak* to anyone with a B.S. And when my son blithely announces that he has registered in . . ."

"My boy didn't even make it through high school," Morgan said. "And the parole board got him the job with Len's Auto Service."

GOING DOWN?

I still smiled. "My wife absolutely hates me."

He brushed that aside. "Hate? My wife saves it up all day and hits me with it at supper. Ever since I told her the boy was no good and that was ten years ago."

I invented a progeny. "My granddaughter got a D in spelling."

He trumped. "My granddaughter failed the first grade. She's got to take the whole thing over and she's eight already."

I folded my arms. "The roof of my house leaks."

He was still with me. "We're living in a three-room apartment and my mother-in-law's the landlord."

That did it. "See here," I said. "It is quite evident that you have completely rejected my Everyman motive for departing this world and prefer to think in terms of family trouble. So be it. However I must warn you that I am quite aware of your attempts to minimize my difficulties by creating imaginary ones of your own."

Morgan had large blue eyes. "Huh?"

"My dear man," I said. "If all you say is true—if you are plagued with the fumes and eternally deprived of the creature comfort of beer—if you have a corpulent, nagging, shrill, hating wife—if you have a delinquent son, a moronic granddaughter, and a mother-in-law for a landlord, then I submit to you that you are one of the most miserable creatures in existence. And that being

the case, why are you standing here gabbling like an old woman? I see absolutely no reason why *you* shouldn't step off this ledge. Why don't *you* jump!"

Morgan stared at me.

"And furthermore," I said. "If we should delve into your intellect, I'm sure that . . ." I stopped and watched him uneasily.

Morgan's face was white and he stared down at the street. He teetered.

My eyes widened. "Now, just one minute . . . !"

But Sergeant Morgan had stepped off the ledge into space.

The psychiatrist and I had an enjoyable two hours of conversation before a police lieutenant entered the room to interrupt us.

He put the facts on the line. "We've been checking up on you. You pulled this same stunt in Chicago, in St. Louis, and now here. What's the matter, you an exhibitionist, or something?"

"I am *not* an exhibitionist. I approached every ledge with the utmost sincerity. I merely lost my nerve at the last moment."

The psychiatrist was understanding. "However you have definitely decided that never, never again will you consider taking your life?"

"Absolutely never," I said firmly. "When I saw Sergeant Morgan step . . . slip off that ledge, I suddenly realized that perhaps inhaling and exhaling still had their virtues." I

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sighed to prove it. "By the way, how
is Sergeant Morgan?"

"He got a few rope burns from
the safety net," the lieutenant said.
"But otherwise he's okay. Except
maybe for a little shock. Keeps bab-
bling about how good it is to be
alive."

I agreed. "No matter how bitter
life is, it is still worth living." And
that reminded me of something. I
removed thirty cents from my wal-
let and handed it to the lieutenant.
"The next time you see the sergeant,
would you please present him with
a pack of Tums. My compliments."



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